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SUBJECT: DUARTE TAKES ON THE CHURCH

11. (SBU) President Duarte, who has been actively campaigning for Colorado Party presidential pre-candidate Blanca Ovelar, has extended his verbal attacks on resigned Catholic bishop (and front-runner) Fernando Lugo to the Catholic Church as a whole. On August 12, Duarte implicitly jabbed Lugo when he said the Paraguayan public shouldn't trust priests "who don't behave like priests and who wear long shirts." Duarte, a long-time Catholic who now attends his wife's Protestant evangelical church, said "I'm not opposed to the church or to priests, but I tell you not to trust those who wear a long shirt." On another occasion last week, Duarte commented that he mistrusts priests wearing cassocks because "we don't know what side they're on." He also called into question Lugo's masculinity, saying if voters were going to elect a president who wears a dress it should really be a woman-- Ovelar. (Meanwhile, Duarte supporters were paradoxically spreading rumors that Lugo had sired 17 children during his time as bishop of San Pedro).

12. (SBU) Catholic Church representatives publicly expressed "irritation" with the president's remarks. Ignacio Gogorza, president of the Episcopal Conference of Paraguay, said he was offended by the president's statements. The church said it would undertake an analysis of Duarte's comments within fifteen days. In response, Duarte said August 15 that if priests want to get involved in politics, they should be prepared to bear the consequences. Duarte noted that "just because (priests) use a cassock and wear a crucifix doesn't mean they're right. Lugo uses a cassock, but not to bring peace or hope, but to enter politics and look for earthly power, and he's lying to many Paraguayans." Archbishop of Asuncion Pastor Cuquejo admonished his congregation August 15 "to better choose your next government, with clarity and lucidity, because the type of government we'll have for the next five years depends on us."

13. (SBU) COMMENT: Duarte had lunch August 16 with Papal Nuncio Orlando Antonini and the diplomatic corps for the purpose of reviewing his administration's progress to date (septel). While Duarte briefly touched on his public exchange with the church by asserting his right to express his opinions, it appears that his meeting with the Nuncio (as dean of the diplomatic corps) was an olive branch of sorts. As the campaign intensifies and Duarte senses that the April 2008 elections could threaten the Colorado Party's 60-year rule, the president is beginning to lash out at all sides with increasing fervor. And it appears that nothing--not even the church--is sacred. END COMMENT.
CASON